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Abstract

In the realm of speculative fiction, science fiction and fantasy differ not only in their settings, but predominantly in their ideologies. The development of the two genres may be illustrated by examples of classical science fiction, space opera, 'metaphorical fiction' and fantasy, each representing different sets of values resulting from contemporaneous attitudes to the notions of history, technology and nature. The Keeper of the Isis Light *by Monica Hughes is a representative of space opera and "metaphorical fiction" movements, combining facade science fiction with the ideological content of fantasy, which makes it a good example of strengths and limitations of both genres.*

Résumé

Bien que science fiction et fantasy appartiennent au genre de speculative fiction, il y a entre eux de différences importantes, pas seulement en ce qui concerne le décor mais aussi l'ensemble des idées. Le développement de ces deux genres, on peut l'illustrer en prenant l'exemple de science fiction classique, space opera, "ficton métaphorique" et fantasy, dont chacun représente les valeurs différentes, qui sont issues de différents points de vue sur l'histoire, la technique et la nature. The Keeper of the Isis Light *écrit par Monica Hughes représente les deux genres – space opera et fiction métaphorique. Il mélange le décor de science fiction et l'idéologie de fantasy, ce qui crée un bon exemple des possibilités et des limites propres à ces deux genres.*

Among Canadian writers there is a significant group of science fiction and fantasy authors, both immigrant and Canadian-born. The former include Robert J. Sawyer and Phyllis Gotlieb; the latter group consists of such authors as A.E. van Vogt, Spider and Jeanne Robinson, Gordon R. Dickson, Robert Charles Wilson, William Gibson, Guy Gavriel Kay, Dave Duncan – some of them, sadly, little known outside Canada. One of the Canadian authors who deserve greater recognition is Monica Hughes. Among over 30 novels she wrote for adults, young adults and children, Isis Trilogy is the most celebrated. The first part of the series, *The Keeper of the Isis Light,* was awarded Canada Council's Children Literature Prize, and in 2000 the trilogy won Phoenix award.

The book is an interesting case of the developments in speculative fiction: outwardly a classical science fiction story, it is in fact much closer to fantasy in the way it treats science; and, because it uses the imaginary world to address universal issues – such as tolerance, adulthood, love, prejudice, and honesty – in a highly symbolic way, it may be considered a specimen of what is sometimes

termed "metaphorical fiction". Since each of the types of speculative fiction is strongly rooted in a particular historically determined philosophical outlook, the distinctions can only become clear if the types are considered in their original historical context, with *The Keeper of the Isis Light* a benchmark against which to measure changes in readers' and writers' attitudes.

In such considerations, the editor's description might be a good starting point. In this case, however, it seems partially misleading. Although its blurb calls *The Keeper of the Isis Light* "a classic of science fiction," it is certainly not a classic of the Jules Verne and H.G.Wells type. However, although the book also contains ideological elements of fantasy, it is visibly a space opera. Naturally, it is also an adventure tale for young readers. To have adventures is difficult for many modern people, except vicariously, by means of stories provided by various media. These stories use different settings and are based on different paradigms which determine typical plot devices, props, character types, ideologies, and settings. Some paradigms seem to allow more freedom in building stories than others, some also seem to answer the needs of the audience better than others, gaining significant popularity. In *The Keeper of the Isis Light* science fiction provides such a background for the story of Olwen. It is thanks to the science fiction paradigm that the main character is given space – a planet of her own – which makes decisions, conflicts, and personalities more important, the absence of an organized society allowing the young protagonist to assume responsibilities, taste triumphs, and encounter dangers: there is space for powerful metaphors to unfold. Towards the end of the 19th century, in *Two Year Vacation*, Verne gave his boy characters an island to live of their own. Such a location would not be a feasible setting in the age when white spots on the maps of Earth are growing scarce, and so Hughes sets her story on the planet Isis, revolving round an F-5 type star in the constellation Indus.

Thus, science fiction is clearly visible in the setting and the props. The description of a starship landing on Isis with one powerful blast of its retro-engines brings to mind all the traditional notions of science fiction. However, the ideology underlying the story is not that classic. Unlike Hughes, fathers of the genre did not treat space as a mere setting that could add exoticism to their stories. In most of the early science fiction, it was rather the characters that seemed additions.

Astronauts with slide-rules

The phrase "early science fiction" already requires explanation. First traces of the genre could be found in *The Republic* by Plato, in *Verae Historiae* by Lucian of Samosata, or even much earlier, in the form of science elements built into ancient legends of great inventors. By the same token, from More's *Utopia* and Kepler's *Somnium* to the travels of Lemuel Gulliver, the stories tended to centre on descriptions and observations of material or sociological phenomena, whether serious or satirical, scientific or speculative. Whether optimistically utopian or more reserved, the works pointed at social and physical sciences, recognizing their potential; even if their uses could be sometimes dangerous, these sciences were to be mastered and employed in future, and the future was thus to be foreseen and shaped. With such focus, characters in much of the early science fiction appear to be virtually dispensable, reduced to the functions of

"experiencers" and "lecturers": the ones who witness whatever the reader is to witness, and the ones who explain whatever the reader must understand. Neither of the two roles encourages complex personalities.

In early modern science fiction, these two types of characters also seem to prevail. Notably, the two great lawgivers of science fiction, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, used characters mostly as mouthpieces and representatives of various views, focusing on scientific inventions and predictions for the future. The branch of hard science fiction that they have established – named so because of its roots in solid natural science – has generally perpetuated the trend. This can be hardly surprising, since many science fiction authors have been professional or amateur scientists, speculating about the development of their subjects and popularizing them in science fiction settings. Such professional scientists as Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Leo Szilard, Eric Temple Bell, J.B.S. Haldane, Miles J. Breuer, George Gamow, Fred Hoyle, L. Ron Hubbard, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Carl Sagan, David Brin, and Gregory Benford, supported by countless amateurs, have continued the tradition of spotlighting the technical, the predictive, and the scientific at the expense of the characters, and, indeed, often at the expense of the plot itself.

A good example of this tendency, *Beyond the Planet Earth* by Tsiolkovsky, completed in 1916, is an account of the invention and construction of a space-faring rocket, which is then tested and employed in several missions. These include circling the Earth, landing on the Moon, assembling a space station, landing on an asteroid, and a Martian flyby. The book features long popular science lectures, both by the narrator and by leading characters, complete with tables of planetary temperatures and distances. Many of Tsiolkovsky's predictions, although too optimistic, proved generally true, and most solutions, crafted in meticulous detail, with clearly predictive intentions, seem theoretically plausible. However, the future life on Earth is merely sketched, and so are the characters. The inventors are a group of barely distinguishable cardboard scientists, who live in an equally unreal lonely castle in the Himalayas, outside the bonds of society, family and, above all, probability.

An example of the hard science fiction sub-genre's continuity is Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Again, the plot, stretching from Earth to Jupiter, seems to blot out the characters, and is in turn marginalized by scientific explanations which frequently interrupt the flow of events, while characters have little or no personal attributes, and, even in the most dramatic situations, seem to be there simply to experience all the things the author chose to show to his readers. The space, though, is certainly real, not a substitute for a lonely island.

While themes and settings in science fiction changed with the changing state of science and technology, this attitude remained relatively stable. Science was the center, not periphery; the protagonist, not the background.

Heroes with light- and steel sabres

Alongside hard science fiction, another branch of speculative fiction has bifurcated and grown: in the 1920s pulp fiction magazines became popular, promoting some remarkable texts, but also producing a mass of second-rate stories which did little but feed on conventional themes developed in other works. As the body of science fiction texts grew, some of once innovative ideas entered

the common stock. The main themes and schemes of science fiction were thus established. The alien invasion, the bug-eyed monster, the time traveller, the mad scientist, the rebellious robot created a set of shared clichés:[1] to use them no longer required creativity, no explanations to the readers, and no scientific consideration.

Such mechanical reproduction could be viewed as deterioration; on the other hand, the authors who wished could now free themselves of the burden of hard science, retaining its devices, and focus on the plot, usually a fast moving one. The 1930s were a decade when such superheroes invaded comic books. Their worlds were merely sketched, and the visions had little aspirations to futurology. So were the worlds of numerous pulp stories: they featured interstellar empires, planet-blasting weapons, gigantic spaceships, and feudal space overlords, all to be found in early works by E.E. Smith and Edgar Rice Burroughs. For their operatic extravagance and heroic proportions such stories became known as "space opera". The highlights of this "space opera" movement included Asimov's classical *Foundation* series. The perspective offered by the cycle is astoundingly broad, since it encompasses thousands of years and planets, and its characters, however flat, still have numerous adventures, visit distant worlds, encounter alien civilisations, solve mysteries, and generally act in the macro scale. Psychohistory, an imaginary science and the main axis of the cycle, is not very plausible, and rather than make veritable predictions about the future, it is mainly used for providing the characters with puzzles and opportunities to set out for quests inside and outside operatically feudal Galactic Empire.

The rise of fantasy was another movement heading in the same direction. By introducing magic, the miraculous and the unexplainable, the authors freed themselves of the need to accurately portray the real world. They no longer had to provide plausible explanations for the state of affairs they described: fantasy led the reader into the Never-Never land, a place beyond causality and rational analysis, a place with no visible connections to the present, where there was enough room for superhuman characters, vast scenery, vibrant emotion, triumph and disaster, and the archetypal metaphors of absolute good and absolute evil. The heroes of space opera had the universe to play and fight in; the heroes of fantasy had another universe, an alternative one, with even less restraint on the part of science.

A typical and, at the same time, foremost example of fantasy is Tolkien's Middle Earth triptych: *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), and *The Silmarillion* (1977). Read as a whole, the story is that of loss, and strongly reminds of Golden Age myths.[2] The old is assigned positive, and the new negative values in a complete reversal of the early science fiction ideology, where the greatest achievement was to explore, to invent, to change. Here, changes unavoidably bring destruction, forgetting, diminishing, and suffering. The opposition is particularly visible in the power of artefacts considered as a function of time: in science fiction, it is usually the newest, the state-of-the-art that proves the best and most powerful; in fantasy, on the contrary, it is usually the oldest that has the most power. It is members of the most ancient race who are the most intelligent, skilled, and strong, the most historic sword that holds the greatest power, ancient spells that are the strongest.

Naturally, this change of perception was gradual. Such tendencies as the growing interest in ecology and the values of non-dominant, low technology cultures seem to have facilitated the shift. As modern technology showed its dangerous face in the times of hot and cold wars, there came a turn towards human values, anarchism, environment, alternative society, and alternative ways of life. The catchphrase "Gandalf for President" showed disillusionment with politics, and the need for clear, fantasy-like values in public life. Such slogans, used to protest war, corruption, and the steady progress of smog and concrete, illustrate the power of fantasy as a metaphor: good and evil; the natural and the artificial; the small, but great-spirited, and the strong, but soulless; the "good, old", and the dangerous new.

However, the progress towards the new could not be rationally stopped. Even in the Never-Never land, time cannot go back, and what is lost, is lost forever. Although *The Lord of the Rings* tells a story of a success beyond hope, although virtually all the good characters survive, although the bad ones are duly punished, the ending still seems to be very melancholic. It is the melancholy of change, of failing to maintain the status quo: magic is disappearing from the Middle Earth.

Writers with mirrors

Magic in itself seemed a good metaphor of the modern life, which proved too complex a machinery for individuals to understand. Even science, more and more branched and specialised, became too great a body of facts for one man to grasp. When he wrote *Somnium*, Kepler was on the cutting edge of science, and able to follow (or even lead) its progress in a range of disciplines. Tsiolkovsky still knew most of the up-to-date discoveries, and enjoyed optimistic views of human progress, both in the scientific and moral aspects. But soon, the common man – and, indeed, the common author – began to experience what Vernor Vinge called the coming of "the Singularity":

> When I began writing science fiction in the middle 60s, it seemed very easy to find ideas that took decades to percolate into the cultural consciousness; now the lead time seems more like eighteen months [...] the "hard" science-fiction writers are the ones who try to write specific stories about all that technology may do for us. More and more, these writers felt an opaque wall across the future. Once, they could put such fantasies millions of years in the future. Now they saw that their most diligent extrapolations resulted in the unknowable ... soon.
> (Vinge, <http://www.ugcs.caltech.edu/~phoenix/vinge/vinge-sing.html>)

In consequence, the role of the science fiction genre had to be rethought. Writers gradually withdrew from specific prophecies, and moved towards parables. In 1969, in the foreword to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. LeGuin described the shift very clearly:

> Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive. [...] The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor. [...] Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of metaphor seems to be its use of new metaphors,

> drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life –
> science, all the sciences, and technology [...] Space travel is one of
> these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology;
> the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor. (LeGuin,
> i-v)

Indeed, much science fiction may be read in this way, including such works as
Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. LeGuin's own book deals with
the problems of reality and pretence, conventions and truth, complementariness
and rivalry in the perception of gender. These questions are built into a world of
androgynous people, and in the interactions between them and a single-sexed
outsider. Thus, the author seeks to communicate some truth in what she herself
calls "elaborately circumstantial lies". Scientific elements, though present in the
background, are not elaborated upon, but rather incorporated in the all-
encompassing metaphor: outer space became another setting for a discussion of
inner space.

This "metaphorical" branch of the genre typically focuses on soft sciences rather
than the hard ones, tackling sociological, metaphysical, and psychological
problems in exotic costume. So, when, in the novel by Hughes, an interstellar
ship descends onto the planet Isis, it is not to explore the new world, but to let the
reader explore the world of Olwen.

The scientific background of the novel is not very rich. Scientific terms have been
scattered here and there to maintain the pretence of science fiction; however,
most of them do not seem to glue together. The characteristics of Isis'
atmosphere, earth-like in the valleys, but not habitable what appears to be less
than one kilometre above, though not totally impossible, would be very difficult
to explain. So would be the reason for maintaining manned stations on possibly
habitable planets, and the mechanism of great storms, said to be caused by stellar
activity, as if there was a link between magnetic and planetary storms. And when
the colonization spaceship after "months of weightlessness" starts its "fall
towards the planet," the author perpetuates the popular mistake that even Verne
made, insisting that gravity would manifest itself on a ship coming near a planet,
regardless of the work of its engines:

> In actual fact, the gravitational field of Ra was already making
> itself felt. The stylo that the navigational officer had left in midair
> almost a moment ago had just reached the table top [...] by then
> Ra's gravitational pull was noticeable. An object put down, stayed
> down, stayed down. An object forgetfully left in midair fell to the
> floor with a crash. (Hughes, 34-35)

The excerpt quoted above is doubly mysterious, since apart from giving
erroneous information, it serves no other purpose. No part of the plot depends on
the description of things falling on board the spaceship; no characters are
developed in its course; no particularly important mood is built in this way. The
reason for including it must lie elsewhere.

Verne happened to make the same mistake as Hughes did, suggesting that a free-
falling rocket is somehow "grasped" by a gravitational field and that objects
inside experience acceleration when it comes too close. Thus, apart from more

than a century between the authors, the blunder is the same. What is different is the reason for incorporating the description.

When in 1856 Verne wrote *From the Earth to the Moon*, he thought of the Moon in earnest, of the Moon as Moon, and of the expedition as a difficult, but possible event. He chose to invent and predict solutions that truly might be used for going above the atmosphere and reaching the Moon. He provided the story with meticulous details[3] of the Moon-gun and of the projectile in which three astronauts were to travel. Attempts at accuracy do not mean that Verne did not make mistakes. Indeed, some of his data are wrong, and the travellers would not have survived in his spaceship. However, Verne tried to make the descriptions accurate: his predictions are verifiable, and his blunders are visible because describing every stage of the expedition in such detail exposed every flaw in his reasoning. The data are not included to build atmosphere; they are the very aim of the text. They are vital, even if they happen to be wrong.

In the book by Hughes the mistake may be the same, but erroneous information was included for a reason very different from Verne's views. It was to make an impression of reality, not to describe it; to give the flavour, not the raw data; to attract, not to educate. By mentioning "gravitational field," the text is linked to science, and this mere suggestion is enough for the author and, probably, for most young readers.

Apart from the dubious science, the author introduces several science fiction devices. Again, she chooses to rely on names: most of the gadgets are stock items, known from other science fiction stories, and the mechanisms of their functioning are left unexplained. There is a robot, but we concentrate on his emotions, not the way he functions; there is a floater, but it is simply another means of transportation; there is the Light, but it only serves as an excuse for humans to be on Isis; there is hyperspace, which makes it possible for settlers to arrive, and quick-growing houses of plastic; there is genetic manipulation, to make the protagonist different; and there is hypnotic suggestion, to maintain the mystery. Each time, the author may rely on the common understanding of these stock science fiction terms, and thus may focus on what is the main aim of the book – which is neither to show science in action, nor to make prophecies about future problems. Instead, Hughes seeks to show real and valid problems in a filtered and attractive form. Both the author and the readers probably realise that the colonisation of distant planetary systems is future far beyond Vinge's singularity point of literary prediction, and cannot be described realistically. Future is a pretext in the book. Its apparent flaws point to other levels of significance: it does not matter if the unusual character of Isis atmosphere is scientifically explainable. What matters is the metaphor it communicates.

Elves – the keepers of the Light

Olwen lives on Isis with nobody but her Guardian, and her pet, Hobbit – a name paying homage to Tolkien. She is as free as a person may possibly be, and happy. She has all the time and space in the world (or: on the planet). She also has a purpose, maintaining the Light. Without a science fiction costume, it would be difficult to achieve a similar starting point. A perfect freedom, a perfect landscape, a perfect pet, a perfect Guardian, perfect birthday: indeed, the word "perfect" appears very often in Olwen's remarks. The planet is Eden before the

fall, or Faust's moment of complete satisfaction. Before Olwen hears about the imminent arrival of the colonists, she even expresses a very faustian and fantasy-like wish that everything stay as it is; that, metaphorically, the magic stays in the Middle Earth; that no new things happen – which is, of course, impossible.

With the arrival of the settlers, numerous divisions appear. The first opposition is, obviously, between the "natives", and the newcomers. The readers are led to identify with a native girl rather than with the valiant explorers and colonisers, typical hero characters in hard science fiction texts. The shift is very significant: the invaders are shown from the other side, not as building the future, but changing the present – for the worse. As in *The Lord of the Rings*, the story describes a succession of losses; again, facing the opposition of the new and the old, the reader is induced to support the old.

Another opposition that recalls fantasy is the question of nature and technology. *The Keeper of the Isis Light* is a novel with a strong ecological touch. The beauty of the planet lies in its rugged landscape and highly adaptable ecosystem. Olwen seems to be a part of this environment, her body repeatedly described as functional, efficient, and agile. Only in the end she learns that this was, paradoxically, achieved by means of technology. However, adapting herself to the world of Isis, she is said to have entered its ecology to the point when she developed an instinctive feeling of the planet, its storms and dangers, which even her creator cannot explain, while the settlers, instead of adapting, try to transform the planet to suit their needs. Their village is something alien and ugly on the face of the planet. The new is technology-based, and technology destroys the fantasy values of nature, harmony, and peace. Isis may soon become another Earth, another bit of Mordor: the author shows the colonists kill animals they cannot even identify; they make a bridge over a stream, which makes the water dirty; they plan to make artificial caves by digging in the rocks; and, worst of all, they intend to spread.

It seems, however, that the settlers have right to change Isis. The Earth, as shown in Mark's retrospections, is highly polluted and overpopulated, and Isis is one of legitimate targets for colonisation. It is the very fact that brought Olwen's parents to the planet. She learns that there was another meaning under her Eden: she is not completely isolated from the outside world, after all. There is a price of responsibility to be paid for the past freedom, and Olwen has to learn tolerance for the settlers.

She still has the upper Isis. The strange qualities of the atmosphere and her different looks separate her from the colonists. The upper Isis remains unspoilt, rough, and free; the valleys are safer, more fertile, but also inhabited by people who work in rationally organised teams with the efficiency of ants. This separation, both actual and metaphorical, introduces the most important themes in the novel: tolerance, prejudice, honesty, self-respect, and loneliness. One of the meanings of the novel seems to be that one can be alone among crowd, and happy by oneself. Being alone is different from loneliness.

The science fiction setting allows for a physical separation of the young couple, forcing them to wear masks when meeting each other. Masks are a very powerful symbol here, signifying the opposition between appearances and the truth. Olwen is the most obvious case of such a difference. However, other characters also

have their mysteries: Guardian is revealed to be a robot, and for a moment Olwen can feel the power of prejudice herself: for a few seconds, her perception of her friend changes, but then the picture of Guardian as a person wins, and she is able to discard all bias. Unfortunately, Mark seems incapable of doing the same with regard to Olwen. His is the most cruel unmasking. Faced with intolerance and Mark's pathetic efforts to love her despite her looks, Olwen decides to leave. In doing so, she also realises her own mortality, for the first time. It is significant that she does not grieve for herself, but for her robot friend, whom she may one day abandon.

Her departure in a way resembles the passing of the elder race of elves from the Middle Earth: what is valuable must leave and seek melancholic peace in Tolkien's land of Valinor; on the island of Avalon; or in the Bamboo Valley, high in the Isis mountains. However, there is no fantasy-like solution in the ending, no conflict between good and evil in this book: Olwen departs, because she bitterly recognises the rights of the settlers. Her solitude is that of resignation, and acceptance. She and her friend have their duties, and their very reason for being on Isis is to make the colonists' progress possible – whatever they might think of the young community. Olwen's final decision is surprising for the reader who expected a happy and morally edifying end. The final choice seems much more adult than the beginning of the book. The Isis is no longer a substitute for the island from Verne's *Two Year Vacation*. If still an island paradise at all, it is apparently a darker one, perhaps the one described by Golding in *The Lord of Flies*.

The mixture of fantasy and science fiction elements contributes to the pessimism and depth of the novel. Both the old and the new are imperfect: the old, because it was not true, an illusion made of masks, hypnosis, and ignorance; the new, because it means rejection and loneliness, and the contrast with beautiful illusions makes the new situation even more bitter. Written in 1980, when both science fiction and fantasy conventions have been questioned, the novel uses their settings and topics, like ecology, distant planets, and human colonisation, slightly altering their expected development, so that the result is surprising for a space opera science fiction, and for a metaphoric fantasy tale in space costume as well. By focusing on psychology, stressing the importance of nature, and appreciating the old, the text questions the values usually connected with classical science fiction, such as science, progress, and technology. By avoiding any open conflict and happy ending, it defies the comic-like traditions of space opera. By stressing that change is unavoidable, and there is no use deceiving oneself and pretending to live in the Never-Never land, it also goes beyond the standard conventions of fantasy. The truth is cruel, but inescapable. There is no easy solution; elves, who were here first, have to fade and go away – with dignity.

The world is not a paradise island, nor is it black and white. Science is no longer one-sidedly optimistic: it gives great benefits, everything that Olwen ever wanted, and her Guardian was able to produce in his laboratory; but it also breeds destruction, pollution, overpopulation, it allows the teeming crowds from Earth to reach, colonise, and subdue the rough beauty of Isis. These people are not flawless, either: not the idealised heroes from Tsiolkovsky's novel, representing the distilled wisdom and excellence of the human race, but average people with their faults and prejudices. They have their rights to Isis, too. And to return to the

idyll of the first chapters of the book would be impossible: it was a lie, as most utopias are. On the Isis, all the time, there was a great company behind the scene: the authority designating planets for settlement, the employer of Olwen's family, and probably the proprietor of her Guardian. Olwen was happy because of ignorance: of herself, of her parents, of the arriving colonists, of love. She has to ask herself, if the truth is worth pain, or is having her brain under hypnotic suggestion the only way to regain happiness.

These are very important questions, not only for the book, but also for the genres it unites. The problem is, to what extent are science fiction and fantasy escapist idylls, and to what extent they show reality. The elements of the real may include science and emotions; metaphorical truth about the world, the humankind, and about the readers themselves. However, it is difficult to have all these aspects simultaneously. Some parts will not glue; some will seem naïve; some will be "elaborately circumstantial lies".

This might appear discouraging. Like Olwen, the writers and readers of science fiction have suffered disillusionments: with the beneficial power of science; with the moral progress of humanity; and with illusions themselves. To avoid the last, readers have to accept the conventions and limitations of speculative fiction. Only then will they be able to access the truths hidden among lies and blunders; truths that science fiction or fantasy settings might show *differently*: from a changed perspective, as more powerful or subtle, more attractive or dubious, more complex or perhaps more distilled. And not all truths have to be pessimistic.

Behind lies, masks, and disappointments, Olwen manages to find one truth: her Guardian loves her, and whatever he did, he did for her good. She knew it before, but now she is able to discover the fact on a different level. It is thanks to this discovery that Olwen manages to agree for the rights of others, and accept her role of an outcast. Despite all the disillusionments, she still has a planet of her own. A part of the planet. For some time.

In order to understand science fiction and fantasy, one must be prepared to willingly suspend disbelief; to suffer incongruities that the book by Hughes so well demonstrates; and to individually search for such bits of the truth among illusions. Whatever their form and the setting of the story, the readers have to judge whether these bits are valid; and whether they are valid only for adolescents, or for adults as well; for mutants and robots, or for all people; on Isis, on Earth, or on all our planets. As Orson Scott Card summarises,

> most of us [...] read these stories that we know are not "true" because we're hungry for another kind of truth: The mythic truth about human nature in general, the particular truth about those life-communities that define our own identity, and the most specific truth of all: our own self-story. (Card, xxiv)

Beyond the surface criteria of veracity, and the wishful simplifications of larger-than-life visions, this "metaphorical" branch of speculative fiction represented by *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, has apparently reached a compromise between the escapist and the representational, and – as such – seems to provide an easy and rewarding access into the world of speculative fiction in general.

Endnotes

1. This meant shared lexicon as well: the word "blaster", for example, invented by Asimov in his *Pebble in the Sky* (1952), became common property.

2. For instance, each passing era of the world brings further destruction and pollution; the present is but a shadow of the glorious past; the span of human life is ever shorter; and the mightiest sail away from the Middle Earth. Innovations, on the contrary, bring chaos and corruption: great wars tear whole lands apart; old trees are cut down; beauty fades; mining wakens demons; new mills poison rivers. For a closer comparison with classical epics, see: Huttar, Charles A., "Tolkien, Epic traditions and Golden Age Myths" in *Twentieth-Century Fantasies*, ed. Kath Filmer, pp. 92-108. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

3. The gun, for instance, was to be placed in Florida, its location specified to the arc minute, and based on optimal flight calculations; the 19250 pound projectile was to be built of aluminium, with walls 0.3 meters thick, and two types of shock absorbers; the trajectory, complete with velocities and accelerations, was carefully analysed – indeed, in places the text seems closer to a blueprint than to a novel.

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